



**Our Father among the Saints Gregory Palamas
Whose Life and Work the Holy Church Celebrates November 14
and the Second Sunday of the Fast as the
Triumph of Orthodoxy.**

Saint Gregory's Life

PART ONE

Foreword

Saint Gregory Palamas stands as a Confessor and Defender of “the holy and blameless Faith of the pious and Orthodox Christians.” The modern authors and commentators on the life and work of Saint Gregory, regardless of their professed interest in sources, have neglected the service in The Menaion on November 14th to the Saint composed by Patriarch Philotheus, which he prepared for the Saint’s glorification in 1368. The same can be said for the Patriarch’s Life of the Saint. The Patriarch had been with the Saint even before he drafted the Hagioritic Tome. The Patriarch himself wrote the acts of the Council held in 1351 in the Blachernae Palace of Constantinople, where the final blow was struck against those whom Saint Gregory termed “enemies of the light.” Thus he was familiar with all the personages and doctrines surrounding the decisions which led to the rightly acclaimed title of the Victory of Orthodoxy to the work of this tireless advocate of deification, holy Tradition, and the purity of the Apostolic Faith of the Church of Christ. Does not Patriarch Philotheus stand as an

eyewitness to the events themselves? Assuredly, he offers us a firsthand account of Saint Gregory's signal undertaking. Who would not recognize in the Patriarch's writings concerning Saint Gregory Palamas a unique monument not only to history but also to the truth of the holy Orthodox Faith?

As for ourselves, do we not stand awestruck in wonder when, in the Aposticha of the Feast, we hear the Holy Spirit address our Saint as "the very mouth of the Lord God."



Saint Gregory Palamas
"the very mouth of the Lord God."

Saint Gregory Palamas was born in Constantinople around 1296, the firstborn of a large family. From childhood, his noble and pious parents taught him both human and divine wisdom and every virtue. Family life was centered around a piety characterized by "pure prayer." His father, Constantine Palamas, became a prominent dignitary at the Court of Andronicus II Paleologus (1282-1328). His father was a man of prayer. In meetings with the Senate, St. Gregory's father would immerse himself in prayer to such an extent that he did not hear the words addressed to him by the Emperor. The Emperor was not concerned since everyone knew that he was occupied in being watchful in the inner life of prayer. Andronicus II, a pious prince, held him in great esteem, and even allowed him to intervene in the affairs of the Imperial family.

Patriarch Philotheus,¹ writing in the biography of Saint Gregory, records the following: Constantine once “took his whole family once on a boat to a place above Galatas, to pay a visit to a hermit who lived in stillness there, and get his blessing. On the way, he asked his servants if they had any food to take to that Abba, so that they might eat with him. The servants said that in the rush they had forgotten to bring any. The blessed man was saddened a bit, but said nothing. As they continued on in the boat, he simply put his hand into the sea, and with silent and noetic prayer he asked God, the Master of the sea, to let him catch something. After a short time (how wonderful are Thy works, O Christ King, by which thou dost marvelously glorify Thy servants!), he brought up his hand from the sea holding a large sea bass. Tossing it into the boat in front of his servants, he said, ‘Look here how our Lord provided for his servant the Abba and has sent him something to eat.’ Do you see, my brethren, with what sort of glory Jesus Christ glorifies those servants who are always with Him and who constantly invoke His sweetest name?”

We have a special testimony to this because, seeing his departure from time to eternity, he relinquished his government post to become a monk and, shortly afterwards, with the name of Constantine, passed peacefully to the Lord.

St. Gregory’s father reposed in 1303, during the boy’s early years. His mother took great care to give him, as well as all his brothers and sisters, a good education in the spirit of Divine Law and Holy Scripture. The Emperor Andronicus himself also took part in the raising and educating of the fatherless lad. Endowed with fine abilities and great diligence, Saint Gregory mastered all the subjects which then comprised the full course of higher education. He did not trust in his own memory. He made it a rule before every lesson to make three prostrations with prayer before an icon of our Lady, the Mother of God. The Holy Virgin did help the pious youth whose steady progress, especially in the philosophy of Aristotle, attracted everyone’s attention. The youngster was the joy of the Emperor’s heart. Andronicus had hopes that Saint Gregory would devote himself to government work.

Such was his degree of proficiency in the Aristotelian corpus when at the age of seventeen he delivered a speech on this subject to Andronicus II and Theodore

¹ Philotheus Kokkinos served as Patriarch of Constantinople for three periods; 1353-1354, 1354, and 1364-1376. During his last period of service, he opposed Emperor John V who intended to negotiate with Popes Urban V and Gregory XI. He glorified Saint Gregory Palamas in 1368, wrote his Life and composed the Service in the Menaion for Saint Gregory who reposed on November 14, 1359. *Please see n. 24.*

Metiochites, a philosopher himself, at the end of the address everyone left in awe of the youngster, and Metiochites was heard to exclaim that “even if Aristotle were present today, he would undoubtedly have praised him also.”

The monk Constantine, however, had left behind a son who, abhorring everything worldly as an illusive dream and filled with an ardent love for God, rose above his earthly position at court with all its temporal advantages, and strove with all his soul to cling to the only God, the Source of all wisdom and the bestower of every gift. He sought out the monks of Mount Athos, met with them frequently, and asked for their advice as to what his next steps in life should be. These conversations, by exposing him to the traditions of the monastic and ascetic life, opened his inner vision to the perception of the vain glory of this world. Following the counsel of the monastics, he decided to leave the court and his classical studies in order to test his strength to see if he could really be a monk.

Saint Gregory’s next step was to exchange his expensive clothes for worthless rags, and then to alter his habits and the manner of his outward life. He simply abandoned all the rules of social convention in order to adopt an ascetic lifestyle. Many of his friends thought that he had gone mad. He had foreseen this, and, being aware of it, he did not alter his course, but accepted the scoffing and general scorn with pleasure. The result of having embarked on this strict way of life for several years was that neither Andronicus’ offers, nor the kindness of friends, nor even the ties of kinship availed to turn him away from the way of the cross which leads to heaven.

At the same time his edifying life and persuasive, grace filled, powerful conversations had their effect on certain members of his household. Consequently, several of his servants abandoned the world and entered the Monastic life. Close behind them followed Saint Gregory himself, accompanied by his mother, his brothers and his sisters. He was twenty years old when he finally decided to become a monk and told his devout mother about it. At first she was rather grieved at the idea, but afterwards she not only agreed with what he was doing, but she also rejoiced in the Lord and, with God’s help, she even persuaded her other children to embrace the monastic life so that she could say with the Prophet: “Behold, I and the children whom God has given me” (Esaias 8: 18 LXX).

Following the commandment of the Gospel, St. Gregory distributed all his property among the poor and, despising with all his heart the beauty, sweetness and glory of this world, he followed Christ. He left his mother and his sisters in a women’s convent. He took his brothers with him in 1316 to the Holy Mountain of Athos and together with

them settled down in a lonely monastery called Vatopedi, where he put himself under obedience to a holy and gifted Father, Saint Nicodemus of Vatopedi (commemorated 11 July), from whom he later received the angelic monastic habit.

After he had been two years with Saint Nicodemus, Saint Gregory was granted a divine visitation. During mental prayer there appeared before him a radiant and magnificent man, whom he recognized to be the holy Apostle and Evangelist John the Theologian. Looking at Gregory lovingly, the Apostle asked him: "Why when you pray to God do you each time repeat: 'Enlighten my darkness, enlighten my darkness'?"

Gregory answered: "What else should I ask but this, that I may be enlightened and know how to do His holy will?"

The holy Evangelist replied: "By the will of the Sovereign Lady of all, the Mother of God, henceforth I shall be with you always."

After three years of unwavering obedience and ascetic life under the wise direction of his spiritual father Saint Nicodemus, Saint Gregory suffered his loss: In profound old age, Saint Nicodemus reposed in the Lord.

Saint Gregory's next step took him to the Great Lavra, the monastery of Saint Athanasius. The Fathers there received him with great honor, as they had for some years been aware of the fame of his virtuous life. He stayed there for three years, amazing all by his wisdom and austerity. This was a time of testing for Saint Gregory and when it came to an end, the Abbot entrusted him with the duty of serving the brethren in the common refectory and also with chanting in church. Here too the wonderful Saint Gregory was a striking model of monastic achievement. He not only royally tamed and subdued the senseless movements of carnal passion, but he also strictly limited even the essential demands of nature, as if he had no need of anything earthly. He stood as a consoling example of angelic dispassion and divine purity.

His biographer, Philotheus, Patriarch of Constantinople, writes, "Living in stillness, he was found worthy of acquiring many spiritual gifts from God, which it is not even possible to name. Nevertheless, to understand somewhat the value of those gifts, he was clothed with such soberness and with streaming tears—the guardians of all virtues—that until the end of his life he never ceased to weep for his sins, or rather the sins of the world."

Along with all the rest of his endeavors, Saint Gregory shouldered the burden of curtailing sleep, without which no one can continue to live. He overcame sleep for three months without giving himself respite at night. For a short time in the afternoon he

allowed himself a light nap and that as a mere precaution against the harmful consequences of such long and exhausting periods of deprivation of sleep.

Having spent several years at the Lavra of Athanasius in obedience to all and in the fear of God, his humility, meekness and industry won for him the general love and respect of the brotherhood. It became evident, however, that with such a way of life, his fellowship with the brethren prevented him from perfectly satisfying the demands of his immortal spirit. Hence, to avoid glory, and to nourish his longing for a more austere life, he departed from that community.

Saint Gregory arrived at the Skete called 'Glossia' where a number of hermits lived under the direction of a Father Gregory, who was also from Constantinople. To this wonderful Elder, so renowned at the time for his experiences of divine vision and mental prayer, Saint Gregory committed himself, and from him learned the mysteries of divine vision and mental purity. It is impossible to describe in human language these ineffable mysteries, in which the mind together with the heart and the whole substance of a man are fused in a single desire of the will and strength to please God, to love Him and, by constant prayer as with a shield, to protect oneself from every tendency to carnal thinking and from the hostile actions of satan; but the very fruits of the life of divine vision uncover the mysteries of the gifts of grace with which God endows His saints. Saint Gregory, deeply immersed in the spirit of prayer and illuminated by it, reached such a degree of compunction and weeping that tears flowed from his eyes in constant streams.

Through divine permission, this stillness or silence, ἡ ἡσυχία, was soon disturbed by the Moslems, who in those days attacked the monks (i.e. hermits) living in stillness outside the monasteries. So Saint Gregory, with some other monks, was obliged to leave his desert and depart to Thessalonica in 1326. From here, the Saint decided to go to Jerusalem to worship the holy places, and also, if God willed, to end his days somewhere there in the stillness of the desert. Wishing to know whether this intention was pleasing to the Lord, he prayed to God about it. Afterwards, in a dream, there appeared to him Saint Demetrius, the Great Martyr, whose relics repose in Thessalonica. The martyr persuaded him not to leave Thessalonica.

Following a rigorous period of fasting and prayer, Saint Gregory received the order of priesthood in Thessalonica. Then, in the company of a few monks, they departed to the nearest monastery, Vereia, a place suitable for the solitary life where they began to labor afresh. St. Gregory's manner of life was as follows: five days in the week he never went out anywhere himself and never used to receive anybody; but on Saturdays and

Sundays, after performing the offices of a priest and receiving the Holy Mysteries, he used to enter into spiritual fellowship with the brethren, edifying and comforting them with his touching and instructive conversation. During these hours following the solitude, and especially after the Liturgy, there could be seen on the Saint's face a wonderful divine light.² During the celebration of the divine services, he brought everyone to tears and compunction. Many of the great holy men were astonished at his virtuous life, for which he was deemed worthy to receive from God the gift of miracle-working and prophesying, and he was called God-bearer and prophet. He was at this time not more than thirty years old.

At this time Saint Gregory's virtuous mother departed to the Lord. Her daughters and fellow-nuns, Gregory's sisters, asked him to come and comfort them in their orphanhood and give them spiritual instructions. Submitting to the call of kindred love, Saint Gregory arrived in Constantinople, went to his sisters, and then hurried back to his beloved desert. But after five years of life in the Vereia hermitage, he was again obliged to move due to the frequent attacks of the Albanian Moslems.

The Holy Mountain of Athos beckoned him once again. Saint Gregory was received in 1331 by the Fathers toiling in the Lavra of Saint Athanasius with great love. He lived in the solitary cave of Saint Sabbas which was outside the monastery. Except for Saturdays and Sundays, he never went out anywhere, was never seen with anyone, and could be seen by no one except for the necessary services of a priest. Saint Gregory taught that the life of prayer is for all Christians, not just for monastics. All the rest of

² The man who loves God shall arrive at such excellency as even to see God, and hear His word and from the hearing of His discourse be glorified to such an extent that others cannot behold the glory of his countenance, as was said by Daniel: "And the wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and some of the many righteous as the stars unto the ages and more" (Dan. 12: 3 LXX). *Against Heresies*: Book 4:26.1 (Edinburg p. 461, 2)

In second century Gaul St. Irenaeus knew of Christians who became radiant with the uncreated light of God. Such incidents are rooted in the Transfiguration of our Christ on Mount Tabor (Aug. 6), the stoning of the Archdeacon and Protomartyr Saint Stephen (Dec. 9), and the Light in which Christ met Saint Paul, His "Chosen Vessel" (Acts. 9:15) on the Road to Damascus.

Furthermore, Orthodox Christians have been called to become gods by grace (Ps. 82:6; Jn. 10:34). This means that we receive in Holy Baptism that which we are called to sustain forever, that is, the ineffable gift of life-giving union with the Holy Trinity. "The person who has been deified by grace will be in every respect as God is, except for identity of essence" (Saint Maximus the Confessor, *Letters to Thalassius XXII* (PG 90:320).

his days were spent in prayer and, as we chant in praise of the Athonite Fathers, “in the honey of stillness”.

Once, during his prayers in his cell before the Icon of the Most Holy Mother of God, the Saint was asking her to keep away all hindrances to complete stillness from himself and his companions and that she would graciously take upon herself the care and provision of all their worldly needs. In answer to his fervent prayer, the most merciful our Panagia Theotokos appeared to him herself, in company with many light-bearing men. Our Lady said, addressing herself to the light-bearing men in her company, “Henceforth and forever, be the guardians of the needs of Gregory and his brotherhood.” From that time, as Saint Gregory himself said, he really did feel that wherever he went, God’s special care for him went with him.

Another time, in a state of prayer, Saint Gregory fell into a light sleep. It appeared to him that in his hands there was a vessel of pure milk which was so full that it was flowing over the brim, then this milk took the form of wine, which, flowing over the vessel’s brim, wetted his hands and clothes, spreading a wonderful fragrance everywhere. As soon as Gregory perceived it, he was filled with holy joy. Then there appeared to him a radiant youth who said:

“Why do you not pass on this wonderful drink, to which you do not pay the proper attention? This is the ever-inexhaustible gift of God.”

“To whom should I pass on this drink, when there is no one in need of it?” asked Saint Gregory.

“Even if at the present moment there is no one actually thirsting for the drink,” answered the youth, “yet nevertheless you should do your duty and not neglect the gift of God, for the proper use of which you will have to answer before God.”

With these words the wonderful vision came to an end. Saint Gregory interpreted it in this way: the milk stood for the ordinary gift of the word, which is, understandably, for very simple hearts looking for spiritual instruction, and the turning of the milk into wine meant that, when the time comes, the Supreme Will would ask him for deeper instruction in the highest truths of the Christian Faith.

To be continued.